Shortwave/

Radio connects user to world

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hangs above his desk. Beside it is a 24-hour clock which gives the times in cities around the world.

They chat about everything from the Packers to upcoming events for ham radio operators. The mediator on this particular night is Jerry. The others include Joe, George, John, Roger and Dick.

The best part of being a ham radio operator is the friendships you make, the guys all agreed.

"When you talk, you don't have to pay a phone bill," Dick said, laughing.

"I've met a lot of friends, and have gone to see some of them in the Yukon, Alaska and Oregon," added Roger.

"It's an interesting feeling to sit in a room to send your radio signal clear around the world," Kraak said. "It's a funny feeling, and a good feeling."

ON THE AIR

Shortwave operator likes chance encounters

'Ham' never knows when he's going to meet someone, somewhere

By Heidi F. Schudrowitz
of the Journal Sentinel staff

Brookfield — Hibernating in their homes during the snows of a long, dark winter, many people kill the boredom by logging on and making contacts with the outside world.

But not everyone is hitting the chat rooms on the Internet.

For amateur radio operators, connecting with another operator is a game of chance, dependent on sunspot activity and the ever-shifting ionosphere miles above the Earth.

And that's what makes it so much fun, said John Kraak.

Kraak, 54, a quiet man with a deep voice, likes taking his chances. He has been forming friendships almost daily over a state-of-the-art transceiver in a second-floor room of his home.

"Legal eavesdropping," he calls it, where listening is 90% of the fun.

An advanced licensed amateur shortwave radio operator, Kraak took up his hobby four years ago after a heart attack, along with eye problems, forced him to retire from his career as a periodontist. But he had experimented with a shortwave radio years ago.

"As a teen, I had a shortwave receiver," said Kraak, who was living in Milwaukee at the time. "My Uncle Olle would show me his. Then I got a used one, but the problem was I had to share my bedroom with my grandfather, who thought it was great to go to bed at 9 p.m. I didn't, so I put it under the bed and got earphones for it."

John Kraak:

"It's an interesting feeling to sit in a room to send your radio signal clear around the world."

When he joined the Army in the late 1960s, Kraak took a shortwave radio with him to Europe.

Kraak has met people from around the world, and has 129 postcards in a scrapbook confirming his contacts. It's customary for operators to send each other post cards to verify contact. Some collect them as part of contests.

He has cards from Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bora Bora. One card shows a train in the middle of a field with a sign that reads, Nowhere, Ill. He keeps a log of every contact, which used to be required but isn't anymore, he said.

Kraak is a member of the Milwaukee Radio Amateurs' Club, which has about 150 members, he said. He goes to meetings to find out what's new in the technology.

"You're always learning something in amateur radio," he said.

To obtain an operating license, an amateur must pass a written exam in radio regulations and basic radio technology. The ability to use Morse code was once also required of all amateurs, but a new class called "codeless technician" has been added to the other four license classes.

TOM LYNN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

John Kraak, a periodontist who is now on disability after having a heart attack, sits with his shortwave radio in his Brookfield home.

Kraak estimates he has invested about $4,200 in his system, but said the average new system costs about $2,000.

Used systems run about $600 to $700, he said.

Kraak's wife, Cheryl, 51, is studying for her license as well.

Typically, when Kraak meets someone for the first time, he will exchange call names, give a signal report, describe to the other person what type of equipment he has and how much power is being used.

Then the real conversation starts, and they will talk about everything under the sun, except politics. That's taboo, he said.

"You meet people from all walks of life," he said.

"We talk about the weather, our families. But typically they're short conversations because the conditions may change rapidly," Kraak said. "All of a sudden you're talking to yourself."

That problem is intensified right now, Kraak said, because the Earth is at the lowest point of sunspot activity, which runs in 11-year cycles.

Sunspots cause the ionosphere to be ionized, and this allows the radio signal to bounce around. When the sunspot cycle is at its lowest, operators here even have trouble contacting New York. Things are expected to improve in 1997, Kraak said.

Even though Kraak's signal is bouncing all over the world, there are no language barriers. Most of the conversations are conducted in English, Kraak said. Kraak has spoken with the Portuguese, Japanese, Slavs and Swedes.

But he also has his own circle of buddies right here in Milwaukee who belong to the Milwaukee Chapter of Ten-Ten International. The group promotes the usage of the 10 meter amateur band.

Twice a week, Kraak checks in with his pals. A world map

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